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ABSTRACT

Preschool children experience literature early on through nursery rhymes, being read to, and tales told by parents and grandparents. This introduction to the literature of a child's culture, family, and times should be a most comfortable experience. On reaching school, however, the child will find that the demands of pedagogy become insistent over many curricular areas, including literature. For many students, literature of the most traditional and elevated types becomes an experience laden with drudgery, with the requirements of pursuit, analysis, and recall on demand. To add to the paradox, fine literature is tightly bound to the scheduled homework of school, the completion of tasks, and the regurgitation of lines, themes, characterizations, and plot arrangements. To these are added the internal concepts of the author's philosophy, motivations of characters, and perceptions of literary style and facility. All of this is subject to being graded, assessed, evaluated, and marked. This paradox between love of literature and the requirements of schooling has persisted and will continue. What needs to be dealt with is a recognition of the near-term and eventual effects of this process. An important concern is the need for improved preparation of the teacher of literature. Another aspect of the problem is the way literature is abridged, cut, censored, or rewritten in the Disney mode before it is presented to students. Finally, educators and parents must pay attention to students' interests and offer books that are in keeping with these interests. (HTH)

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PEDAGOGY AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: AMITY OR HOSTILITY?

An Examination of Education and the Literary Arts

A presentation for

THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR MODERN LANGUAGES

AND LITERATURES

XVIth International Congress
Budapest, Hungary
August 22-27, 1984

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In this discussion, I wish to consider the aspects of education and literature as they are experienced by children and youth. While most of us recognize the power and importance of literature in all cultures, we often deplore the absence of literary works in people's lives. We see instead the power and effectiveness of the media, along with what we decry as their inherent triviality.

In turning to the schools, we find that the tasks of instruction cover a vast area of knowledge, skills, and ideas. Literature, the creative product of the human mind and soul, is one of many. The schools, therefore, do not achieve up to our expectations, at least in the fostering of love for the works of literary art. Some of us see a situation, not much to our liking, in which the schools give only token time and effort to literary works. There is, in effect, a form of hostility, hardly intentional, but prevalent in the mind of the student. Yet in all cultures, the love for the body of literature is acknowledged as a major goal of all experience, whether it is in the school, in the home, or in the life of the society itself. Nations insist on fostering that amity toward literature which is basic to the lives and happiness of their citizens.

It is this paradox and discrepancy, the condition of amity and of hostility with which I wish to deal in this essay.

Literary Experience in the Family

Almost from the start of life, we and our children have needed the experience of literature. It comes in the early cradle songs and lullabies. Exposed to the ancient folk songs and mother's croonings, we begin to experience art in sound, in the simplest of words, and in the body contact which is often a part of such basic relations between the educating parent and the child.

As the child grows, before entering the official school with its required curriculum, the interested parent holds the child and tells stories, or reads from a book with pictures and interesting words.

The act of holding is not without importance or value. It is the body contact between parent-teacher and the child that inspires what psychologists have long perceived as a healthful, life-sustaining awareness of self for the child. In the specific context of the reading, the use of language, the pointing to pictures and text, and the general sharing of the emotions that are generated, the child develops an attitude of interest and on-going receptiveness to such forms of literature. We might say that the conditioning that takes place in this exposure to and experience with literature has a life-long persistence.

The child thus experiences literature early on and knows it as poetry, as tales told from the deep reservoir of his parents or grandparents, as soothing, stirring, exciting, and even fear-inducing. Yet, whatever the emotions may be

that accompany the literary involvement of the child, there is engaged an appetite for more.

The excitement is pursued to its resolution. "Ah," says the child with relief, "I knew it would come out that way."

The fear is explored, the body reacts even in its physiological elements, the child seeks and finds reassurance and ultimate calm. For the young child, walking into the forest of peril is a time of doubt, of hesitancy, of true fear that the danger is focused against him. Yet with the comfort of fear's ultimate resolution into calm, peace, and protection, the danger and its frissons are sought again and again. And the story, such as one of the Grimms', that carries fear, suspense, a sense of danger, is greeted with interest, and yet with the expectation of ultimate security.

In this developing of literary awareness, parents may play little if any conscious role. It is the thing to do. It has been a family practice for generations to open to the child the gifts of the surrounding culture and its arts. For many parents, it is an interesting process in their on-going, day-to-day provision of sustenance to the child.

Thus the introduction of a child to the literature of his culture, his family, and his times should be a most comfortable one. It is strongly reinforced by the socio-emotional context in which it is experienced. We recognize clearly the linkage that is established in the family environment between the child's self-confidence, the love

which surrounds him, the positive aspects of that environment, and his recognition of literature. Certainly, it is the literature which is of greatest impact for a young child,--the fairy tales, the nursery rhymes, the stories of heroes and heroines, and the tuneful songs which encourage his participation and urge him on peacefully to rest.

The Problems of Schooling

On reaching school, however, the demands of pedagogy become insistent over many curricular areas, including, of course, literature. For the teacher, perhaps in loco parentis legally, perhaps in concept only, the goals of education are explicit and pervasive.

The teacher will aim at promoting literacy and at developing the common forms of communication. The child will be involved in learning how to relate to others: to other children in the class and school; to the teacher and to other adults in the school environment and in the community. The goals of socialization develop from the child's perception of himself and extend to his behavior toward others.

The function of education also includes that of bringing to the child the concepts of the nation, the ethics of its fundamental establishment and continuity, and the need for his participation in its further progress.

Literature in the school program is of course a continuing activity. Teachers provide texts; children read and often memorize. Topics from the literature in the established curriculum are assigned as homework, to be

discussed, analyzed, commented upon, and prepared for further review and analysis in class.

To many students, literature of the most traditional and elevated types become part of the school's tasks, not because their authors anticipated that they would be so treated, but because this literature is universally deemed to be important and worthy of the students' time and effort. A paradox ensues. The literature is acknowledged to be examplars of the national and world cultures. It is indeed "great", as in GREAT BOOKS.

Yet the experience is laden with drudgery, with the requirements of pursuit, of analysis, of recall on demand. To add to the paradox, the association of fine works of poetry, the novel, mythology, drama, folk tales, is tightly bound to the scheduled homework of the school, to the completion of tasks, the regurgitation of lines, themes, characterizations, and plot arrangements. To which we add the internal concepts of author's philosophy, motivations of characters, and perceptions of literary style and facility.

All of this, says the pedagogue, is subject to being graded, assessed, evaluated, marked.

The resolution of this paradox is not readily at hand. The conflict between love of literature and the requirements of schooling has persisted and will continue. What needs to be dealt with is the recognition of the near-term and eventual effects of this pedagogic process.

We must also recognize that in schools at the primary level the object is to teach reading; literature may be

almost absent as an experience for the young student.

In the higher levels, it is the student who reads the literature for his school requirements and then reads no more. What he is required to read of Dickens is the one Tale of Two Cities; when he reads Macbeth and Julius Caesar, he has read all of Shakespeare for his lifetime. When he has learned and reported on the stories of Pushkin, he will read no more Pushkin and may seek nothing further in that literary form.

While there an expressed love for literature, its forms of presentation in the school curriculum lead one to believe that education is at war with the arts. When the art forms (let us focus on those of literary expression) are squeezed into formats and placed before the young learner with the threat of a failing grade, the hostility of even the most dedicated teacher of literature is inscribed in the perception of the student. The loving emotions of the young child are transmuted into reluctance, evasion, diffidence, and dislike.

What parents have so well begun has been converted by the school into something quite the opposite. The school has become the place of pressure, tension, and despair, with much of it focused upon literature. The teachers have insisted upon learning and have with their efforts brought about short-term response and acquiescence but long-term negation.

We can look to some remedies, but where literature is

connected irrevocably to success in school and to progress toward further education, much effort must be made to modify the processes without losing the objectives.

I am referring to skills that the teacher must wield to involve the student emotionally in the learning, with all the elements of interest, motivation, excitement, and appreciation that may be possible. The processes of education and the measures for relating the experiences of young people to works of literature must be inviting to the point of minimizing evaluation and marks. The student who is won over to a love for the literature will, in good time, be able to show the assimilation of such experiences when called upon by official assessment.

I would prefer to provide the young student with the fullness of experience based on the work and then observe his own efforts in seeking further.

Why not assess the values of instruction in literature by the additional works of Dickens, or Shakespeare, or Pushkin that the student has reached for on his own? That the skill of the teacher has encouraged him to seek out?

What has the instructor done to invite the student to pursue the contemporaries of the "required" authors? In what ways have the "masterworks" of the traditional past been looked at in terms of contemporary problems? Were Romeo and Juliet lovers like "you" or, being star-crossed, were they the victims of unfortunate circumstances?

I do not feel that the major quarrel is with the selections of literature in the curriculum. There is the problem of how such works are presented, how they are dealt with, and how the student is invited to bring himself to them.

The Teacher and Literature

An important concern is the need for improved preparation of the teacher of literature in both the elementary and the secondary school. Since it is at these levels that formal and initial introductions to literature are made, I consider them more crucial than the later stages where students make their own choices as to curriculum and educational activities, often despite their school experiences.

If the teacher is to introduce the young student to poetry and the literary arts, then that teacher must also be initially imbued with a love for those arts. That person ought to be a writer, a keeper of journals, a poet--even a failed one--and a reader and lover of good books. If the teacher merely reads what is current and what is "required", then we can expect little transfer to students of love for literature and little enduring interest in it.

As we consider the selection and preparation of those who shall teach, we hope for the most literate in the conventional sense and for the most dedicated and knowledgeable in the literary sense. Naturally, it is the pedagogy we decry that will have produced a majority of those

who will teach. Yet in the preparation of the teacher, at the elementary or secondary level, we look for attention to be paid to this concern. We hope that if the candidate for teaching is not already imbued with that amity toward literature, he will be immersed in it during his professional preparation. We would also expect that school principals and directors would seek out those most evidently prepared to offer the treasures of literature in their daily classroom activities, rejecting all others....

After all, we look to the schools, their teachers and their curricula for the development in the student of a life with literature. We cannot expect the family to continue with the young student what it was able to do so well with the infant and toddler. Nor can we be confident that the media, radio and television, will provide that life-long development for our countries' youth.

It is necessary, therefore, to seek such change in pedagogic systems which will offer to young children and youth the necessary experiences with relevant literature. It also important to foster in many more families those activities which we have mentioned earlier,--the surrounding of infants and children in the pre-school years with stories, poems, songs, and a nourishing use of language.

Of course, one must unite to encourage a more benign television and a greater willingness on the part of media personnel to establish a common bond on behalf of the people and their literature.

We have considered the introduction to literature by family members, the requirements of a system of education that nurture hostility, and the importance of the teacher's own readiness to serve as a bridge toward literature between the child of the family and the child of the school.

The Uses of Literature

In another aspect of the problem, we need to examine what is done to literature before its presentation in the classroom.

Stories, plays, and poetry, being considered too mature, too gruesome, too sexy, or too dull, have been tampered with. They have been abridged, cut, reduced to current parlance, or omitted entirely. What emerges for the child to experience is much like every-day conventional text.

An interesting example is Swift's Gulliver's Travels, where the land of Laputa is hardly examined, and where Gulliver's helpful means of putting out a fire in Lilliput is overlooked.

If you don't care about the wars of the Big Endians and the Little Endians or about the inventive geniuses who people the Island, or even about the English translation of its apparently Spanish name, it will be because the teacher didn't know or didn't care either. Or because you were better off sheltered from all that.

Another example is the opposite case, where such

editors as Disney have taken the original story and converted it to film productions of a most insipid kind. The film story is then printed by the Disney enterprise with sales in the millions. Such has been the experience of works like Gulliver, Snow White, Pinocchio, Peter Pan, and Treasure Island, among others. With such "popularization", the schools accept the Disney version as the real article and the original literature is never seen or heard from again.

Tales from Shakespeare are read and enjoyed; what is made of the plays or the sonnets? We are offered Defoe's Robinson Crusoe; alas that we only learn about Moll Flanders much later if at all! We are given Balzac's Pere Goriot with slight reference if any to his Droll Stories, or to Eugenie Grandet.

Some of the contents of literature which we offer to children have recently been analyzed and psycho-analyzed, to the point that teachers and parents may hesitate in choosing them. The tales of witches and evil stepmothers, of trolls, goblins, and demons, are seen to represent more than exciting characters in thrilling stories. They are given meaning which is universally representative of evil. Oedipus-type relationships are hinted at and we are discouraged from exposing the young, avid reader and listener to such contacts.

"Like the sleeping princess in the wood, the fairy tale may be hedged about with bristling notes and thickets of commentaries, but the child will press straight to the

beauty, and awaken for his own delight the old charmed life." (Scudder, 1894).

Nursery rhymes and Mother Goose verses are noted as having strong political overtones from the times of their original conception. So be it. But is an overtone to be a burden for the child who enjoys Jack Sprat who ate no fat, or who will laugh at the notion of the cow jumping over the moon? Excessive analysis, for the young child, is the death of interest.

Kornei Chukovsky describes the sad situation where a family, educated and modern, tried to protect its child from fantasy and fairy tales. All that was accomplished was to send the fairy tale underground and give it even greater charm. The child, when left alone, filled her room with creatures of fantasy and imagination. She asserted her right to the fairy tale, after all. (Sendak's Max does this very thing in Where the Wild Things Are.)

In chastising protesting pedagogues, Chukovsky said, "Every time the Children's Publishing House puts out a new edition of Hiawatha, or the tales of Pushkin, or Munchausen, the enemies of childhood scream: 'The Revolution is in danger!' They save the Revolution from Pushkin..." (Chukovsky, 1966).

In some cultures, the excessive deification of recent and current national heroes has intruded into literature. We would do well to limit such materials to history rather than to encourage their illicit entry into the creative expression of recognized artists or writers of folk tales and stories.

We look in vain for the exciting use of language, the twists and turns of plot, the clear and fantastic delineation of character, and the recognition that endings may be happy or sad.

Perhaps it is fortunate that the heroes who most effectively enter into national literatures are ancient enough to be inspiring and distant enough to arrive without social or political blemish. Witness El Cid, Ruslan and Ludmila, The Song of Roland, The Knights of the Round Table, and others equally fascinating to young (and adult) readers.

In current literature for children and youth we may observe a profusion of stories and books which we are told bring the reader into the reality of the present day. The works are pre-occupied with the trauma of adolescence, of young love with its sexual activities, of sexual activities without any love, and of the shifting, changing culture of today's youth. Lessons may be taught and morals may be offered so as to lead the youth in the "right" direction as regards personal ethics, social improvements, and interactions with others.

Parents and pedagogues are confused with the books that deal with today's youth and their problems. Such stories seem to be more concerned with the psychological problems of life's transitions than with their preferred concepts. Some responsible adults have felt that it is better for such matters to be presented in "literature" than that they should have to deal with them directly, face to

face with their children.

But young readers seek them out and, if they are not in the schools' curricula, so much the worse for the schools and the teachers of literature. The confusion of adults comes from the openness of the discussion, the use of vernacular and non-standard language, and the assumption that the "reality" of the characters is that of every reader. The doubts are that young readers need such books. Shouldn't they be reading the stories that are not quite so current, not so problem-laden, and not given to discussions that most families are not themselves ready to conduct over the dinner table?

Yet if our criteria are examined carefully, what do we see of life's transitions in Hamlet and Lear, in The Lord of the Flies and Brave New World? They are certainly embodied in these works and have much in common, plotwise, with some current books for children and youth. The difference may well be in the use and mis-use of the language, in the ease of plot resolution, and in the failures of characterization. Read one and you've read them all! It is for the pedagogue and the specialist in literature to make common cause and find those works which enhance the literary experience rather than avoid or diminish it.

I conclude with a question and a suggestion.

The question is one that I find interesting and personally appropriate, being a professor of pedagogy AND literature. It is, how did WE do it? How did we--being here in congress assembled--retain and develop our love for

literature? Was it in spite of the schools we attended, or because of some very dynamic motivational factors that influenced us?

Wht kinds of reminiscences have we to offer for our successful evasion of pedagogic hostility? What introspections could lead us to seek to do the same for our students and our children?

With answers to such questions, and the incentive to define them, we should be able to begin to resolve the hostility of educational systems and endow them with amity and the consolations of literature for their inhabitants.

Finally, the suggestion. We must pay attention to children and their interests if we are educators or parents. The books we offer should be those which are in keeping with those interests. Let us not be blind to the media manipulations of our children and their attention.

We are in a struggle for the minds and souls of men; it begins with the child before he enters the school and continues mightily when he is embraced by the system. Therefore, let us collaborate first with parents and then with the pedagogues. Let us maintain together the treasures of literature and seek to increase their store by adding today's works that merit that title and bringing them into the home and the school.

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NOTES:

Chukovsky, Kornei, From Two to Five, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966. Pp. 122-123.

Scudder, Horace, E. Childhood in Literature and Art, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894. Pp. 201-216.